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Pope on secularism: Seek dialogue, but be ready for martyrdom

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
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tFacing the ?plurality of value systems and ethical outlooks? associated with secularism, Pope Benedict XVI today urged Portuguese Christians to embrace the ?nucleus? of their faith. The pontiff also hinted they should expect blowback, calling Christians to be ready for ?the radical choice of martyrdom.?

tBenedict hailed the secular separation of church and state for ?opening up a new area of freedom for the church,? but also warned that the ethical pluralism can sow confusion about ?the human meaning of life? and also ?marginalize? the public role of religious faith.

tDuring comments aboard the papal plane, Benedict nonetheless stressed the importance of dialogue with secular culture.

?The presence of secularism is something normal, but a separation of cult from life, a separation of secularism from cult and faith, is anomalous and must be overcome,? Benedict said. ?The great challenge is for the two to meet and to discover their true identity ? this, as I said, is a mission for Europe and a human necessity in our time.?

All in all, Benedict?s pitch vis-à-vis secularism on the opening day of his four-day swing in Portugal seemed a version of the ancient Roman dictum, ?If you want peace, prepare for war.? Benedict?s advice to believers making their way in a secular world was, ?Seek dialogue, but be ready for martyrdom.?

tThe struggle with secularism is expected to define much of the pope?s time in Portugal, traditionally an overwhelmingly Catholic country where the faith still looms large in public life. (The first day of Benedict?s trip, for example, has been declared a holiday in the capital city of Lisbon, and the other days are national holidays to allow Portuguese pilgrims to descend upon Fatima and Porto.)

tYet even in Portugal, the inroads of secularism are clear. Polls show that only about 19 percent of Portuguese Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis, and the current Socialist government of Prime Minister Jose Socrates pushed through a measure legalizing abortion following a national referendum in 2007, and parliament recently also voted in favor of making Portugal the sixth European nation to permit gay marriage.

tThat measure is presently awaiting the signature of President An'bal Cavaco Silva, a member of the more conservative Social Democrats. Should he balk, Socrates has said he has the votes in parliament to override a veto.

tIn his airport speech, which often sets the tone for a papal trip, Benedict XVI steered clear of the gay marriage debate or other specific public policy questions. He sought to craft his message not in terms of a debate between competing lobbies, but as a deeper philosophical meditation on the nature of freedom.

t?The point at issue is not an ethical confrontation between a secular and a religious system,? the pope said, ?so much as a question about the meaning that we give to our freedom.?

tBenedict hailed Portugal?s Republican revolution of more than a century ago, which brought down an officially Catholic monarchy in favor of a secular state, for bringing the church new freedom. He said that whatever ?sufferings? the transition caused have mostly ?been faced with courage.?

tAt the same time, the pope invoked dramatic imagery to describe the counter-cultural nature of being a religious believer in a pluralistic culture.

tPluralism, the pope said, requires a believer to make ?a journey to the core of one?s being and to the nucleus of Christianity, so as to reinforce the quality of one?s witness to the point of sanctity and to find mission paths that lead even to the radical choice of martyrdom.?

tThroughout his pontificate, Benedict XVI has made the defense of traditional Catholic identity vis-à-vis Western secularism a top priority.

tThe pope opened his remarks with a reference to Fatima, describing it as ?heaven itself? opening over Portugal. He appeared to link what tradition regards as Mary?s appearances in Fatima over several months in 1917 to the emergence of secular societies in Europe at roughly the same time.

tFatima, the pope said, is ?like a window of hope that God opens when man closes the door to him.?

t?It is not the church that imposed Fatima,? Benedict said, quoting the late Portuguese Cardinal Manuel Cerejeira. ?It was Fatima that imposed itself upon the church.?

[John Allen is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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